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B. F. Skinner, 1926–1928: From Literature to Psychology

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In the two years between graduation from college and enrolling in graduate school, B. F. Skinner tried to initiate a literary career, failed at the task, and chose psychology as a field for graduate study. In this article we examine his literary background for sources and themes specifically relevant to choosing psychology, and provide an interpretive framework of considerations that seem more generally relevant to understanding his failure as a creative writer and his subsequent career choice.

Although B. F. Skinner's account of his switch from literature to psychology during his "Dark Year" in Scranton has a dramatic quality about it (Skinner, 1976, pp. 298–302), the reader may be left wondering exactly how his literary background predisposed him to make that specific career choice. It is true that Skinner had had an assortment of experiences with psychological subject matter (Skinner, 1976, pp. 291–297), but in contrast to his involvement with literature, the experiences he lists seem haphazard, minor, and occasionally rather commonplace (for example, experiencing illusions of movement: Skinner, 1976, pp. 296–297). Moreover, as an autobiographer, Skinner has taken unusual care to keep in check the well-known autobiographical proclivity towards retrospective interpretation and explanation (Skinner, 1979a). As a result, the reader of *Particulars of My Life* (Skinner, 1976) will not find a ready-made and thorough explanation of his career shift. Looking for further explanation, though, the reader might at least start by looking deeper into his literary background.

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Biographical studies which emphasize the subject's intellectual development typically search for influences in the person's reading, correspondence, and so on. In extreme forms, this method is "idealistic" in a pejorative sense, for it seems to treat the "ideas" encountered in books and conversation as simple *causes* of the subject's development, without attention to the concrete circumstances of life or to the context surrounding the intellectual productions. Moreover, the subject's reading and conversation might be only *consequences* or reflections of processes—psychological processes, for instance—the causes of which lie outside the strictly literary. Recognizing these shortcomings need not compel us to abandon this literary approach, however, at least not until it has been tried out in the case at hand. Because Skinner has provided a large number of leads for this sort of literary detective work, the present article takes up the invitation to see whether a theme or pattern emerges in the strictly literary sphere—that is, in his reading and writing during the Dark Year—which would make his career switch to psychology more understandable.

It is possible that his choice of psychology had very little to do with his literary background and was, in that restricted sense, arbitrary. Elms (1981) has proposed a psychological interpretation of Skinner's career choice which strongly suggests that a choice of any field at all would have resolved Skinner's "identity crisis" just as satisfactorily as did the choice of psychology (Elms, 1981, pp. 472–473). In the course of the present

article, therefore, we will look systematically at the question of arbitrariness, and will check for continuities and discontinuities between Skinner's choice of psychology and his literary background.

An interpretation of a specific person or life-event from an explicit psychological system of ideas—be the system Freudian (e.g., Mazlish, 1975), Eriksonian (e.g., Elms, 1981; Erikson, 1958), or some other—presupposes the universal validity of the system underlying the interpretation. As an alternative to such a self-conscious framework of interpretation, we will restrict our analysis to an enlarged description whose purpose is to situate our subject in his historical context and to provide "atmosphere" and background. Skinner's autobiographical account of his career choice lends itself ideally to such an approach, because it is full of documentation and largely free of retrospective embroidery and interpretation (Skinner, 1979a). For speculative theorists with already developed theories to try out, we leave open the question as to what psychological system or theory most adequately accommodates the particulars of Skinner's career choice; for those less inclined to hypothetical-process explanations, we leave open the question as to what nomothetic principles our subject's development exemplifies. The present article therefore may be regarded as an exercise in narrative description.

BACKGROUND AND CIRCUMSTANCES

The two years Skinner spent between graduating from Hamilton College in June of 1926 and enrolling at Harvard in September of 1928 divide easily. There is a first period of a year-and-a-half spent almost entirely in Scranton from graduation to early January, 1928; at that point began a second period with his departure for New York City for about five months, and then for Europe that summer, occasions for new experiences and influences in settings quite unlike Scranton. Toward the end of the first period, his at-home-in-Scranton period, he made his "choice of psychology," a significant event marker in his development (Skinner, 1976, pp. 300–301) and a convenient breaking point for our purposes. For a sense of overview and for purposes of reference in the present article, a simplified chronology of some of the more notable intellectual and personal happenings of his two-year postgraduate period is provided in Table 1.

Periodicals

During the first phase, from June through the end of 1926, Skinner was working at his literary activities of reading and writing. He subscribed to several periodicals while living in Scranton. He had probably already begun his subscription to the *Saturday Review of Literature,* whose first issue appeared on August 2, 1924, for he was regularly reading a column by Christopher Morley in that periodical during his undergraduate years (Skinner, 1976, pp. 218, 262). The various "little magazines" to which he subscribed—*The Dial, The Exile,* and *Two Worlds Monthly*—appeared at times indicated in the chronology. He also subscribed to the *Haldeman-Julius Weekly* newspaper. These latter periodicals are a motley collection, as we shall see.

Ezra Pound's *Exile* first appeared in April of 1927, and had only four issues, a not uncommon fate in the world of "little magazines" (Hoffman, Allen, & Ulrich, 1946). Skinner was probably led to subscribe by his admiration for Pound, whom he had defended in his undergraduate writing in the college literary magazine (Skinner, 1976, p. 235). *The Exile* is marked by editorial slackness, which Pound dispassionately admitted in the second issue, and much of the prose it contains is uneven. Pound seems to have regarded the magazine as an experiment (not atypical for little magazines) and used it as an outlet for self-important pronouncements which he called "editorials." His editorial in the third issue concludes: "Quite simply: I want a new civilization." His advice for contributors, which closes the second issue, is: "Anybody attempting to contribute to

TABLE 1

A time-line of personal events and reading during Skinner's two postgraduate years

CHRONOLOGY

Month/ Year	Intellectual, Reading	Personal, Activity
June 1926	Probably begins subscriptions to most of his literary magazines.	
July		
Aug.	Russell's review of **The Meaning of Meaning** in **The Dial.**	
Sept.	Reading Henri Bergson's **Creative Evolution.** Russell reviews E. A. Burtt's book in **The Dial,** praises Watson, criticizes Bergson.	His father's offer.
Oct.	Reading H. G. Well's **World of William Clissold.**	
Nov.	Sinclair Lewis's **Arrowsmith;** Max Stirner's **The Ego and His Own.**	Visit to A. P. Saunders at Hamilton College.
Dec.		He declines his father's offer.
Jan. 1927	Reading Joyce's **Ulysses.**	Making ship models.
Feb.		One week visit to New York City. Reviewing musical performances for Scranton newspaper.
Mar.		
April	**The Exile,** first issue.	Begins work as a landscape gardener/laborer.
May	Reading Reymont's **The Peasants,** Butler's **Erehwon,** Lewis's **Elmer Gantry.**	
June		Ends work as landscape gardener.
July		Begins work on his **Digest of Decisions.** Goes to Bread Loaf, Vt. to work on the **Digest.**
Aug.		Returns after a month to Scranton.
Sept.	Russell's "Things That Have Moulded Me" in **The Dial.**	
Oct.	**The Exile,** second issue.	
Nov.	Wells's article on Shaw and Pavlov in the **New York Times** (Nov. 13, 1927).	His "choice of Psychology".
Dec.	Russell's **Philosophy** is released in the U.S. Louis Berman's **Religion Called Behaviorism** is noticed in **The Dial.**	
Jan. 1928		Leaves for New York City.
Feb.		Skinner's **Digest of Decisions** is published.
Mar.		
April	Reading Pavlov's **Conditioned Reflexes** and Watson's book on child-rearing. **The Exile,** third issue.	
May		Applies for graduate study at Harvard (May 21) and is accepted for M.A. program (May 24).
June		Returns to Scranton by early June.
July		Sails for Europe (July 2).
Aug.		
Sept.	**The Exile,** final issue.	Academic year begins at Harvard (Sept. 24).

this periodical ought to know at least two languages. If intending collaborators do not already know French, I suggest that they learn it first and submit manuscript after they have" (*The Exile,* Fall, 1927, p. 121). This, despite the fact that it is an exclusively English-language periodical.

It is hard to find any basis for thinking *The Exile* was an "influence" on Skinner, aside from its strongly critical attitude toward contemporary society, which coincided with Skinner's in tone, though not in origin. Pound was preoccupied at the time with the economic theories of Major Clifford Hugh Douglas, and laid up all the blame for social faults against what he regarded as inherent defects of capitalism as an economic system. That theme was to grow in importance for Pound, working its way into his later poetry, *The Cantos,* and in part motivating his admiration for Mussolini and for authoritarian governments in general (Heymann, 1976). Skinner's disaffections with society-in-general, although quite noticeable for the first ten to twelve months after graduation, were to diminish subsequently, especially when he had chosen a career in psychology.

The Haldeman-Julius Weekly was a muck-raking weekly newspaper of four to six pages with a strongly anti-religious tone. The publisher, Emanual Haldeman-Julius, published a quarterly and a monthly magazine as well, and the purpose of all his periodicals was to expose culturally sustained superstition and hypocrisy in the U.S., particularly in the south and in small towns. The weekly was, if anything, even more exclusively anti-religious than his other periodicals. In his crusade "To Make the World Unsafe for Hypocrisy,"[1] Haldeman-Julius also produced inexpensive editions, called Little Blue Books, of literary classics (e.g., Shakespeare and Gorki), poetry (Milton and Horace), skeptical essays (Voltaire and Schopenhauer), self-education and self-improvement tracts, reference works, and so on. Skinner had collected and read several of the Little Blue Books (Skinner, 1976, p. 94).

The American Mercury, to which Skinner also subscribed, was a monthly of about 125 pages edited by George Jean Nathan and the great iconoclast, H. L. Mencken. In each issue, a large variety of articles was edited to a uniform style—in contrast to the individualism of writers in *The Dial* (see below)—and offered a journalistic travelogue of America's regional qualities and peculiarities. The *Mercury* of the mid-1920s exuded an Olympian amusement at American follies. That *The Mercury* could have pointed out a path for Skinner into psychology, however, seems quite unlikely. There were few social-science articles and reviews, and those that one finds were generally concerned with topics in history, evolution, language, economics, the eugenics movement, and anthropology-sociology. There were even fewer articles on psychology, a state of affairs improved when Grace Adams began to contribute articles in mid-1928. In the two years prior to that date, however, there were no articles on child-raising problems or on psychoanalysis, topics of established appeal to the reading public.

The Dial is noticeably different from the periodicals we have described so far. Political commentary was virtually absent; the writers were concerned only with a separate aesthetic domain that included the fields of poetry, fiction, essays, music, theatre, and art—*modern* art, that is. Though Skinner probably began his subscription in July of 1926, he had become at least acquainted with the reputation of *The Dial* at Hamilton College—an undergraduate classroom exercise involved his writing a letter to its editor (Skinner, 1976, p. 204). *The Dial* was a monthly publication of about 80 pages, mostly of criticism and reviews, with some original fiction and poetry, and three or four photographic reproductions of modern painting or sculpture. The critical articles were usually four to seven pages in length; their tone was invariably lively, and many of the reviewers had already established reputations as "modernists."[2] The scope of works sampled was international, though with a marked European emphasis, and a particular leaning toward French literature. This slight Francophil-

ia would have matched up nicely with Skinner's background in French at Hamilton, and with his admiration for William Shepherd (Hamilton College professor of Romance Languages) and for Ezra Pound, who had made a reputation in Europe just prior to World War I as a skilled translator of medieval French poetry.

The Dial steered almost entirely clear of the social sciences, an exception being the occasional article by Bertrand Russell, to whom the remaking of society on a rational basis provided by the social sciences, and especially psychology, was feasible and necessary in that postwar decade. In several of his writings, Skinner has described his debt to Russell, whose review article in the August, 1926, issue led Skinner to Watson, thence to Pavlov, and eventually to psychology as a career (Skinner, 1959, pp. 361–362; 1976, pp. 298–300).

Though casual reflection might lead one to think Skinner's subscriptions were an appropriate tool for the aspiring writer, an examination of these periodicals ought to incline one to the opposite conclusion. *The Exile* was probably too uneven to provide any literary models, and, at the other end of the spectrum, the *Two Worlds Monthly* was a showcase of highly stylized literature, generally of a style quite removed from the realistic and descriptive style that Skinner had already developed as an undergraduate. *The Dial* contained mostly criticism and its pages were crowded with nicely finished, urbane prose by writers with international reputations. It would be obvious that the writers not only were masters of the specialized topics of their reviews, but were also conversant with several literary traditions, some of them rather inaccessible. This feature could discourage imitation. The very charm of *The Dial*—its variety, its short pieces, its stable of accomplished writers—was probably the wrong thing for Skinner, despite the appreciative tone of his autobiographical remarks on the magazine. The activity of reading is different in kind from that of writing, and one need not expect substantial positive transfer. Skinner's periodicals seem to have served as guides to current books; however, as a source of literary training, the periodicals were of doubtful worth.

Books

Since periodicals include articles on many topics, it is probably inevitable that Skinner's reading of them would give the impression of heterogeneity. It is therefore of interest that the books Skinner read during the Dark Year show comparable variety. Though Skinner *could* have been studying the work of a single fiction writer, there is no evidence that he read systematically in one author, or that he actually studied the style of any particular author. His Dark Year books include a philosophical interpretation of biology (Bergson's *Creative Evolution,* 1907/1911), a "sociological" novel (Wells's *William Clissold,* 1926), psychological novels (e.g., Dostoevsky's *Brothers Karamazov,* 1879–1880/1912; Constant's *Adolphe,* 1807/1925), a detailed fictional portrait of Polish peasant life (Reymont's *The Peasants,* 1924–1925), an eighteenth-century English comic masterpiece (Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* 1760–1767/1950), a philosophical analysis of science (E. A. Burtt's *Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science,* 1925), and a defense of ethical solipsism (Stirner's *The Ego and His Own,* 1845/1907/1971). Skinner says he read Watson's (1925) *Behaviorism,* and virtually all of the French edition of Marcel Proust's (1913–1927; English trans. 1934) multi-volume fiction masterpiece, *Remembrance of Things Past,* as the volumes appeared in the second half of the 1920s. This is a helter-skelter assortment which shows Skinner was sampling broadly, rather than following a program of concentrated study in a literary specialty or author (though Proust may come close to qualifying). Moreover, his method of discovery of reading matter seems to have been fortuitous rather than systematic; for instance, he was led to Watson's (1925) *Behaviorism* by a footnote at the end of Russell's (1926b) review of *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden & Richards, 1923). Some of his other

choices were no doubt prompted by notice in the reviews he read, for they were recently published.

With the benefit of hindsight, we can judge it more appropriate for Skinner to have obtained work as an editorial assistant for a "little magazine." It would have sharpened his writing skills and, much more important, he would have made personal contacts in a literary milieu in which the majority of reputations in American modern literature were launched (Hoffman et al., 1946, pp. 1–17). The literary world of the 1920's was one of personal contacts and self-promotion, deliberately open to undiscovered talent and novel literary styles shunned by mass-circulation periodicals such as *The Atlantic, The Century, Scribner's,* and *Harper's* magazines. Skinner's classmate at Hamilton, Joe Vogel, became an editor of *Dynamo,* a short-lived magazine of the mid-1930's (Hoffman et al., 1946, p. 319). His classmate, John Hutchens, also moved to New York City and made a career in more conventional literary and publishing enterprises. Given his literary successes at Hamilton College, Skinner surely could have expected comparable chances of success. Breaking into this world virtually required that one move to a metropolitan center where literary outlets existed and literary hopefuls lived and worked. For Skinner, marooned in Scranton by lack of independent income and by family agreement, this world was virtually closed. Of the many English-language little magazines published between 1910 and 1930, the majority were edited and published in such places as New York, Chicago, London, and Dublin, though these cities certainly did not monopolize the field.[3] Unfortunately for Skinner at this time, no little magazines were produced in Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Writing

Judging from surviving manuscripts that Professor Skinner generously allowed me to examine, the creative writing that he accomplished during his Scranton period is surprisingly meager. Nothing has survived from that year which is as good as the three stories he sent to Robert Frost for evaluation or the story called "Elsa" he wrote in his senior year at Hamilton.[4] Some of the stories on which Skinner worked during 1926–1927 were actually begun in college. Some are promising—an incomplete piece called "For a Place in the Sky" contains a convincing portrayal of self-consciousness in a bereaved woman—but most are unfinished or spoiled by heavy-handed irony or exaggerated characters. In the surviving manuscripts, protagonists are almost evenly divided between male and female, and the pieces were written invariably in the third person, with the omniscient author supplying the description. Social discomfort is a common theme, and irony a typical mood. Mockery of the social climber is frequently seen.

In his autobiography, Skinner correctly notes that for serious literature he could find no audience (Skinner, 1976, p. 269). For an already available, but not especially critical, audience of newspaper readers, he produced literary things of much smaller worth. For a column called "Odds and Ends," he recycled poetry from his first two years at college, with a fictional character named Colonel Splashton serving as the presumptive author and the main topic of these mixed prose-and-poetry pieces (Skinner, 1976, p. 269). He also sent contributions to a column in the Scranton morning newspaper, which was edited by "R. L. W." and called "This Foolish World." But these turned very quickly into intercollegiate verbal jousting, since R. L. W. was a graduate of Colgate, traditional intercollegiate adversary of Hamilton (Skinner, 1976, pp. 267–268).

Life Circumstances

A cynical viewpoint marks Skinner's newspaper writings, and an ironical attitude is taken in many of his literary productions of this period. A somewhat more complete picture of Skinner's response to his unsatisfactory life circumstances is afforded by a correspondence he had at this time with the Dean of

Hamilton College, Arthur Percy Saunders.[5] Hamilton College was given these letters in the same year Skinner's *Particulars of My Life* (1976) was published; he excerpted a couple of passages in his second autobiographical volume, *The Shaping of a Behaviorist* (Skinner, 1979b).

The Skinner-Saunders correspondence is full of dissatisfaction and criticism. Skinner reveals himself as hypercritical of the American college (even though he had already graduated), of Scranton, of his father, of American philistinism, and of the conventional life with its ethic of service. Even the *Saturday Review of Literature* eventually came under criticism as "a collection of the over-time drivel of the hernia-ed [sic] brains of college intellects" (Skinner to Saunders, November 29, 1926). The letters show him in an intense conflict over authenticity and personal integrity, which he described as "the inevitable struggle to choose between a reasonably smug conventional life and the chaotic road of being HONEST with yourself" (Skinner to Saunders, December 15, 1926, capitals original).

Sometime in September, 1926, Skinner's father offered to set him up "as manager of an Employers Self-Insuring Bureau with a fabulous salary" (Skinner to Saunders, 29 September 1926). While tempted by the offer, Skinner's "only doubt is as to how long I could stay in Scranton and keep emotionally alive . . . Wouldn't I surrender? . . . How do I know that my finer emotions won't sublimate themselves to the thrill of a Kiwanis three-cheer?" (Skinner to Saunders, September 29, 1926).

Max Stirner's (1845/1907/1971) *The Ego and His Own,* mentioned in his correspondence at the time and later in his autobiography, fits this phase of criticism very closely. Stirner's little book is a defense of philosophical egoism, originally published in the mid-nineteenth century. For Stirner, man's natural state is one of ontological separateness and aloneness. Stirner was therefore disposed to see life in human society as "unnatural," that is, as built upon an evasion of the fundamental truth of individual separateness. Consequently, the social life appeared to be rife with hypocrisy. From this platform, Stirner attacked institutionalized religions, especially Christianity. Rather like Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century, Stirner perceived that those preaching a morality of specified actions and attitudes were secretly committed to the opposite actions and attitudes. In this line of thought, the ethic of service, which Skinner's parents (especially his mother) strongly endorsed (Skinner, 1976, pp. 40–41, 182), would invariably seem to cover over a great amount of self-serving. Contempt for the American "Puritan" was a prominent feature of Skinner's personal worldview in the fall of 1926 and a popular theme among American intellectuals more generally at this time (Allen, 1931/1959, pp. 160–173; Hoffman, 1965, pp. 355–369). It was the main idea behind Sinclair Lewis's caricature of boosterism in *Babbitt* (Lewis, 1922), which Skinner had read; it was a prominent aspect of the revolution of personal and social mores that was associated with the 1920s; and "Puritan" hypocrisy was a frequent target both of the *American Mercury* and of all the Haldeman-Julius periodicals. Skinner's reading certainly *reflected* his jaundiced outlook.

By mid-December of 1926, Skinner declined his father's offer (see Table 1), and his correspondence with Saunders suggests a reaffirmation of his commitment to the artistic enterprise: in a letter of January 24, 1927, Skinner declared his "closest kinship" with Ford Madox Ford, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce, all of whom had remained committed to their art during years of obscurity, financial distress, and apparent failure. While he might have read Watson during this phase, it seems unlikely, for Watson is not mentioned in his correspondence with Saunders, nor does he fit into the almost exclusively literary company that Skinner was keeping in his reading at this time. It is unlikely that in early 1927 the social sciences had yet appeared to Skinner as an alternative to his literary vocation. His letters show that he was still at work on his writing. Since he had not yet exhaust-

ed his one-year grace period, it is not surprising to find him still committed to the original understanding he had worked out with his father.

Literary creation was difficult, however. By early 1927 he had succumbed to the distraction of making ship models in a workshop in the family garage, and a week's visit to New York City in February convinced him he might even make a living at that trade. As the winter came to an end, so did his literary plan, and on April 19, 1927 he began work as a landscape gardener (Skinner, 1976, pp. 284–285). Though the employment was brief, it seems to have been exhilarating. He continued to write to Saunders, and the letters are alive with delight in the simple pleasures of work. He took to reading *The Peasants* (Reymont, 1924–1925) "to fit the mood of day laboring" (see Table 1), but from the absence of reference to any literary projects in the letters, it seems reasonable to conclude that he had ended his literary efforts.

Skinner could not go about choosing another field until he had given up on his literary aspirations, which raises questions as to reasons for the failure of his literary plans. We have touched on this matter above. The following considerations seem relevant to a full-fledged interpretation.

Literary Failure

Skinner's failure was not the result of an absence of routine, for he followed a regular schedule (Skinner, 1976, pp. 262–263). He read and wrote, and his efforts resulted in typed and handwritten manuscripts in various stages of composition. For most writers, the compositional sequence involves an initial written production, followed by a revision process of deletion, addition, and rearrangement. The revision process was not carried far enough in many of the typed manuscripts that have survived from Skinner's at-home-in-Scranton period, and on only one manuscript is there evidence that anyone else read and criticized his stories. Skinner had shown in his college productions that he could write effectively, which Robert Frost's evaluation corroborated, and his successful college stories have a finish which suggests that they were revised again and again. If improvement in a skill depends on accurate evaluation, Skinner's literary skills were unlikely to develop in Scranton, because he lacked a critical audience.

In addition, Skinner's procedure in creative writing was partly responsible. His method involved seizing upon some specific feature of a person or situation that he had actually experienced, and then elaborating at sufficient length for a short story (Skinner, 1976, p. 252). His longest short story, "Elsa," is only 3,500 words; the three stories he sent to Frost are in the neighborhood of 1,000 words. In such limited compass, the writer must rely on "hard-hitting" technique, on novel viewpoints or surprising conclusions based on pointedly drawn descriptive sketchwork. Skinner's procedure of discovering a subject was well adapted to such a literary strategy, but it fairly demanded he have a dependable supply of fresh, striking personal impressions. His best story, "Elsa," was prompted by a visit to an unusual rural community designed along lines of utopian simplicity (Skinner, 1976, p. 252). His existence in Scranton, confined largely to his home and familiar territory (Skinner, 1976, pp. 262–263), was just too impoverished for his métier. While he surely could have been more exploratory, his letters to Saunders show that he did not expect to find much of interest among the philistines. As a result, in Scranton he lacked both an audience of literary peers and a supply of fresh material for writing.

Skinner has provided still a further diagnosis: "I had no reason to write anything. I had nothing to say" (Skinner, 1976, p. 264). Taken by itself, the first sentence is peculiar, for he had compelling—but ineffective—reason for writing, namely to establish his literary vocation. The second sentence is not much better. What is it to have nothing to say? (See Skinner, 1976, pp. 263–264 for his own elaboration.) Robert Frost's letter is helpful in understanding Skinner's difficulty.

Skinner had submitted three short stories to Frost for critical examination in response to an invitation that Frost had

offered at the Bread Loaf writers' school in the summer of 1925. Though Frost found Skinner's work "clean run" and containing "real niceties of observation," he cautioned that what distinguished the successful writer is the "ability to write strongly and directly from some unaccountable and almost invincible personal prejudice" (Skinner, 1976, pp. 248–249). Behaving out of "invincible personal prejudice" is not what one would expect from a young man who had been "taught to fear God, the police, and what people will think" (Skinner, 1983, p. 25). Indeed, *Particulars of My Life* (Skinner, 1976) portrays a child and adolescent with a highly developed awareness of demands by the social environment for right conduct.

Skinner's undergraduate literary work took place within the context of campus literary activities and of the writing school at Bread Loaf. It is unfortunate that Skinner did not set out upon his postgraduate writing career in some place far removed from the parental home: the home and its inhabitants had years before become a complex structure of circumstances for performing approved activities, being a dutiful son, obediently sitting down to work on his writing, and so on (Skinner, 1976, p. 265). Small wonder that he followed a regular schedule. And he had long since acquired personal habits of complying with external demand. But the agreement that defined his at-home-in-Scranton existence required that he produce literature that was sufficiently imaginative, creative, and interesting to launch his career as a writer. Imaginative play and exploration, and writing from "invincible personal prejudice," are probably very difficult in a state of conscientious responsiveness to external demand. If Frost's recipe for literary success is correct, Skinner's chances of succeeding under these circumstances were slim. The fact that Skinner wrote a very competent digest of decisions in labor disputes (Skinner & Skinner, 1928) shows that *the mere task of writing* was not the stumbling block, but that the stumbling block was the task of *imaginative* writing. In the Dark Year in Scranton, Skinner's imagination found an outlet in largely unproductive ("escapist") activities, such as listening to music, making ship models, and fantasizing solutions to his vocational problem (Skinner, 1976, pp. 262–276). Even the activity of reading, which we initially treated as an appropriate activity for the aspiring writer, probably served as a technique of escape and was, therefore, counterproductive. A more elaborate interpretation along these lines might be illuminating.

Choosing Psychology

Skinner had solved his vocational problem by going to work as a landscape gardener in the spring of 1927. The solution was short-lived because an allergic reaction to barberry resulted in his premature retirement (Skinner, 1976, p. 285) and threw him into vocational limbo again, from which he was rescued by his father's suggestion that he work up a compilation of decisions made by an arbitration board in the anthracite coal region. Thus began a phase of engagement, accomplishment, and a choice of a field for graduate study.

Skinner probably began his compilation some time in June, 1927 (see Table 1), chronologically the end of his year of grace. After beginning the task in Scranton, he went to Bread Loaf, Vermont, "for more than a month" to work on his *Digest of Decisions of the Anthracite Board of Conciliation* (Skinner & Skinner, 1928).[6] Though he later dismissed the work as literary hack-work,[7] the product of his labor is a volume of 258 pages that categorizes and cross-references over 1,100 separate decisions of the Anthracite Board. It summarizes the decisions in a 24-page table, and includes almost 50 pages of index for 684 technical terms. The task must have been monotonous for the young man, but it is clear that he was good at this kind of work, which is much closer to scientific fact-gathering and classification than it is to the writing of fiction. It may be of significance that he consolidated his leanings toward psychology while he was nearing the completion of the *Digest,* in the fall of 1927.

Skinner has anchored his choice of psychology to his reading an article by

H. G. Wells in the November 13, 1927, *New York Times Sunday Magazine* (Skinner, 1976, pp. 300–301). In the article, Wells asked: Who has been making the greater contribution to civilization, the English playright G. B. Shaw or the Russian physiologist I. P. Pavlov? At the end of the considerations that make up this article, Wells cast his vote for Pavlov. In Wells's article, there was no mention of Watson, and the terms "behaviorism" and "psychology" were not used.

If only we had more information. At that point, in the fall of 1927, Skinner may already have read Watson's (1925) *Behaviorism,* to which he was at some point led by Bertrand Russell's (1926b) earlier review of Ogden and Richards's (1923) *The Meaning of Meaning.* But in the fall of 1927, he had not read Pavlov's (1927) *Conditioned Reflexes,* which was not yet available in the U.S., nor had he read Russell's (1927) *Philosophy,* which was not released in the U.S. until December, 1927. He had probably not yet read, or written his review of, Louis Berman's (1927) *The Religion Called Behaviorism.*[8]

Assuming he was working intently on *The Digest*—he researched and wrote the entire book between June and December of 1927—and was reading his periodicals, it is more probable that he read and reviewed Berman's book *after* reading Wells's article in mid-November. It may even have been an exercise whose function it was to confirm his important decision concerning a career. Since this review would have been his first public appearance "as a behaviorist," it is unfortunate that there appear to be no surviving records to date its composition more precisely, and that we must rely instead on conjecture.[9]

The second phase of Skinner's two-year interim begins with his residence in New York City, from some time in January of 1928 to the end of May or early June (Skinner, 1976, pp. 302–311). He had a variety of new experiences in an environment quite unlike Scranton. He also bought and read Pavlov's (1927) *Conditioned Reflexes* and read Watson's book on child rearing (Watson, 1928). While still living in New York City, he applied for admission to graduate study in the Harvard Department of Philosophy and Psychology, on May 21, 1928, and included in his application an offer "to submit several personal testimonials to my interest in, and understanding of, the subject [of psychology]."[10]

The New York experience must have been very affecting, if we are to judge from his summarizing evaluation written to A. P. Saunders from the city: "New York has been a rich experience, but I am sated with it. There has been much uneasy idleness, a good deal of hard work, a great deal of idealized love and much plain sex. But for all it has given me (music, art, experience, contacts, variety) I am goddam sick of it. I have read, studied, worried, sunk into ecstasy, wallowed in depression, languished in boredom. If nothing else comes of it, I am satisfied that I shall never feel that I am missing life, if I grow to live quietly" (Skinner to Saunders, May 28, 1928). During this period, he was undoubtedly seeing psychology in his personal experiences (Skinner, 1979b). Moreover, his experiences in New York antedated his application for graduate study and therefore may have inclined him more definitely to psychology. He had already given up on his literary vocation and had declared to his family his intent to pursue further education in one of the new social sciences, a change that makes the New York period topically distinct from our subject of literature and psychology. The same point must be applied to the last portion of his two-year postgraduate period, which was spent in Europe. He sailed on July 2, 1928, after he had applied and been accepted at Harvard. Again, we leave the details and anecdotes to Skinner's autobiography (Skinner, 1976, pp. 312–319).

CONTINUITY AND DISCONTINUITY IN HIS CAREER CHOICE

The considerations enumerated above lend to Skinner's "choice of psychology" in the fall of 1927 a quality of arbitrari-

ness.[11] After all, he had hardly explored his new field of study in any detail, and he did not actually carry through on his "choice" by applying for admission to graduate school until the following spring.[12] At the time of his application, he was living in New York, employed part-time in a bookstore, and was soon to return to Scranton. Conceivably, he could have changed his mind at that point and pursued some other vocational path.

The timing of his "choice of psychology" in the fall of 1927 suggests the following. Skinner's decision in late 1927 must indeed have been "a tremendous relief" for his parents (Skinner, 1976, p. 302). This decision must have been a relief for him as well, for one can hardly refrain from suspecting that his choice of a field of study permitted him to escape the unsatisfactory circumstances of his existence in Scranton. By the fall of 1927, he had already exceeded the one year which his father had accepted as the trial period for his son's literary vocation. The writing of *The Digest* had extended this grace period, but that was drawing to a close.[13] As an attorney, his father had no doubt made a practice of sticking to "the letter of the law," and the younger Skinner could reasonably hope for no further extensions of the grace period. For the sake of emphasis, one might say that virtually *any* choice of career would have served to resolve his predicament.

In going to work as a landscaper the previous spring, he had discovered the virtues of taking action as a method of ending prolonged indecision (Skinner to Saunders, April 18, 1927). Moreover, he had contemplated some rather desperate career possibilities already—raising chickens, landscape gardening, and building ship models (Skinner, 1976, pp. 272, 283, 285). Pursuit of an advanced degree, even in a comparatively unfamiliar field such as psychology, would have been more sensible than any of these vocations, and would also have been more congruent with the social standing of the Skinner family in Scranton. (Skinner's father had done something even more daring when, as a young man, he had left a secure position in the drafting department of the Erie Railroad shops in his hometown to pursue training for a career in the law).

Given all these considerations, it is rather implausible *not* to regard his "choice of psychology" as serving an escape/avoidance function (see Skinner, 1979b, p. 37). His residence in New York City for several months and his period alone in Europe prior to arrival of his parents probably served, in part, the same function.

The notion of arbitrariness, of course, is a summarizing interpretation, and there are several facts that it cannot encompass. These facts support a notion of continuity in Skinner's development and especially in his choice of psychology. We will not try to decide in favor of one or the other interpretation, but will turn from chronological exposition to topical considerations that make his choice of psychology appear less arbitrary.

Criticism

For some time, Skinner had been attracted to ideas that were contrary to received views. The reader of *Particulars of My Life* cannot fail to make out the oppositional and fault-finding personal qualities of our subject in his young manhood. And in his correspondence with A. P. Saunders during the Dark Year, one sees an even more disgruntled young man, chafing at his situation and struggling unsuccessfully with his literary mission. Although he had previously been generally free of overtly expressed political conviction, this correspondence shows a strongly antagonistic attitude toward existing political-cultural arrangements. Judging from these letters, one would think Skinner's father was the very incarnation of "bourgeois" attitudes. Indeed, he was an active booster in the Kiwanis and the local Republican organization, often serving as a speaker at civic gatherings, but for B. F. Skinner "the essence of Kiwanis" was a very strong phrase of derision in the Dark Year (Skinner to Saunders, December 15, 1926). Skinner's unsatisfactory life circumstances in Scranton gave his gener-

alized oppositional stance a personal depth.

The well-known themes of "art for art's sake" (as opposed to "bourgeois" philistinism and pragmatism) and the "isolation of the artist" (as opposed to forced conviviality and boosterism) appear in his correspondence. They were also reflected in the social criticism of the books and periodicals he was reading, especially in the at-home-in-Scranton period (see Table 1). The *American Mercury* and the *Haldeman-Julius Weekly* provided him with continual reminders of the shortcomings of American society. So did Sinclair Lewis (e.g., *Babbitt,* 1922, and *Arrowsmith,* 1925),[14] and Max Stirner was a destructive critic of virtually all social arrangements. H. G. Wells (*The World of William Clissold,* 1926) was a rather more constructive critic of contemporary Western society. He is particularly noteworthy because of his tireless propagandizing for societal arrangements on a firm scientific footing; in *Clissold,* he opined that psychology was the only one among the social sciences that was "really getting a grip" on its subject (Wells, 1926, Vol. 1, p. 214). We have already remarked on the importance of Wells's later article on Shaw and Pavlov in Skinner's decision to pursue graduate study in psychology.

Such progressivist ideas enjoyed wide currency, and Skinner's reading would have made him conversant with them. More localized criticism of existing models of human nature and practices was the thrust of the books of J. B. Watson that Skinner subsequently read (*Behaviorism,* 1925; *The Psychological Care of Infant and Child,* 1928). On the matter of criticism of cultural practices, Skinner's personal inclinations *seem* to have enjoyed a happy confluence with more broadly voiced trends.

Bertrand Russell

Although no coverage of behaviorism as such was presented in *The Dial,* there were enough scattered mentions to suggest that the intellectually aware reader would not only be familiar with behaviorism but would have formed an opinion about it. Beginning with the July, 1926 issue, a fairly careful reading shows only six brief mentions, one of them quite unfavorable.[15] Bertrand Russell, however, mentioned Watson in glowing terms in the August, 1926 issue and, in the September, 1926 issue, he remarked of the current developments which were undermining traditional philosophy that "Dr. Watson's Behaviorism is the spearhead of this attack" (Russell, 1926c, p. 184).

Russell must be given the very first importance here, if we are to judge from Skinner's own retrospective testimony (Skinner, 1959, pp. 361–362; 1976, pp. 298–300). We have already remarked on the seminal role of Russell's review of *The Meaning of Meaning* (Ogden & Richards, 1923) in August, 1926. Russell had published a couple of other articles and reviews, including two reviews of E. A. Burtt's (1925) *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science,* which probably sent Skinner to reading it.[16] In his article, "Psychology and politics," Russell (1926a) claimed that the development of a sensible political life was dependent on future advances and applications of psychology: "The great practical importance of psychology will come in giving ordinary men and women a more just conception of what constitutes human happiness" (Russell, 1926a, p. 187). While Skinner may not have read the article—he probably began his subscription with Volume 81, starting with the July, 1926 issue—Russell defended the same sentiments in an article that appeared in the September, 1927 *Dial,* which Skinner is more likely to have read. In the article, Russell severely criticized the political order which, he said, is built on a false ethics resting on a mistaken psychology. "Traditional moralists have made a mistake in preaching self-sacrifice . . . which leads to hypocrisy and self-deception" (Russell, 1927b, p. 186). Assuming that he read the article, Skinner could not have failed to see that this was an indictment of the ethical philosophy of his parents, that "Puritan" ethic of service to the larg-

er community. We have also remarked on this topic, above. Russell concluded: "Morality . . . should not be based upon self-sacrifice, but upon correct psychology" (Russell, 1927b, p. 186). Russell may have provided for Skinner—already given to criticism of contemporary ethics—a bridge from merely personal discontent into psychology. Of course, Russell's message would have reinforced similar pronouncements by H. G. Wells and, probably later, J. B. Watson. Since much of the criticism of social and sexual codes of conduct in the 1920's appealed to the presumptive truths of psychoanalysis, Russell's more specific uses of psychology would also have been congruent with a larger cultural criticism of which Skinner could not have failed to be aware.

Description

Skinner's turn from a literary to a scientific vocation certainly represented no break with a personal repertoire of skills in observation and description. *Particulars of My Life* includes a number of incidents which reveal that as a young man he had acquired personal habits of careful observation, occasionally critical, and apparently modeled by his father (Skinner, 1976, p. 210). That this personal feature was an enduring one needs little emphasis: his approach has often been called "descriptive behaviorism" (e.g., Chaplin & Krawiek, 1979, p. 283), and a related kind of descriptiveness is found in his autobiographies, whose style he has publicly explained and defended (Skinner, 1979a).

In the Dark Year, Skinner staked his vocational hopes on his development as a descriptive writer. In a letter to Saunders, he confessed, "The only kind of writing which fits in with my idea of pure literature . . . is objective writing. I can't honestly or dishonestly do any other kind" (Skinner to Saunders, August 16, 1926). His preference for description fit in very well with the newer "realistic" writers of this period whom he admired: F. M. Ford, whose novels are filled with discursive illustrations of British social conventions around World War I; James Joyce, whose *Ulysses* contains stunningly convincing renditions of conversation, flight of ideas, rumination, Dublin cityscape, and both real and imaginary reportage; and H. G. Wells, whose later novels were largely fictional vehicles of social description, criticism, and his visionary recommendations for more satisfactory societal arrangements.

Skinner had actually tried other kinds of writing, rather less successfully, as the reader can judge from some of the poetry he reprinted in *Particulars of My Life* (Skinner, 1976, pp. 204–207). That poetry is spoiled by a mannered and magniloquent style, reminiscent of the late Victorian poetic tradition.[17] After his sophomore year in college, though, Skinner wrote comparatively little poetry, and his descriptive strengths were increasingly evident in the essays and fictional pieces of the remainder of his college career and on into the at-home-in-Scranton period (see Note 4).

Finally, the Dark Year came to an end with the completion of *The Digest of Decisions* (Skinner & Skinner, 1928), which we have described briefly above. The *Digest* was a thoroughly descriptive-classificatory project, much closer to scientific description than to Skinner's Dark Year fiction. His successful accomplishment of this writing task stands in marked contrast to the utter failure of his creative-writing endeavors in the Dark Year.

The Psychological

Critical and descriptive leanings could have led a young man into any of several fields for graduate study. In *Particulars of My Life,* Skinner describes a number of small incidents which reveal to the reader his psychological interests prior to his career decision (Skinner, 1976, pp. 291–297). In a small community that used disapproval as a means of social control, Skinner might reasonably have acquired habits of observing his own conduct carefully (Skinner, 1976, p. 61; see also p. 281), and one might be tempted to treat his kind of childhood social environment as a relevant factor in the genesis of interests in personal psychology. That in-

terpretation is in need of support by appropriate nomothetic relationships from the relevant subfields of psychology, however, and we cannot pursue those possibilities in the present article. In college and afterward, Skinner developed an interest in the psychological novel, in Dostoevsky, Proust, and various less familiar French novelists (Skinner, 1976, p. 271). In addition to straightforward literary concerns and epistemological speculation, his writing during the Dark Year included some self-examination (Skinner, 1976, p. 281). "Introspective" methods have, of course, long been a stock technique in writing poetry. Lastly, beginning at least in the Dark Year, Skinner began practicing a ruminative analysis of recollections, of visual illusions, and visual aesthetics (Skinner, 1976, p. 296). In his autobiography, he related this practice to the style and content of Marcel Proust's multi-volume novel, which he read during and prior to the Dark Year (Skinner, 1979b, pp. 14, 16). He continued to pursue these practices after he arrived at Harvard (Skinner, 1979b, pp. 10, 16); and he admitted to some interest in the mentalistic-introspective studies going on then in the Harvard Department of Philosophy and Psychology (Skinner, 1979b, p. 10). Later, he even published a small article on a visual illusion (Skinner, 1932).

Given the recommendations of Pavlov by the trusted H. G. Wells and by a biology instructor at Hamilton, and given the recommendation of Watson by Bertrand Russell, Skinner *at least* had names in mind when he chose psychology for graduate study in the late fall of 1927. Our considerations have pointed to additional supportive material for his choice and make it appear quite a bit less arbitrary. Nonetheless, it is apparent that neither in the fall of 1927, when he decided on a field of study, nor in the fall of 1928, when he arrived at Harvard, was he whole-heartedly either a psychologist or a behaviorist.[18]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In biographical matters, one follows an unsteady path back and forth between the particularities of the biographer's subject and the nomothetic regularities that the subject's experiences at least occasionally exemplified. In constructing an expanded narrative on the basis of leads provided in *Particulars of My Life* (Skinner, 1976) and in the Skinner-Saunders correspondence during the Dark Year, we have concentrated upon the available particulars in order to provide an atmosphere of details for the story of Skinner's failure as a writer and of his choice of psychology. Therefore, we had to postpone for other occasions or for other investigators the task of subsuming elements of the story under presumptive theoretical mechanisms or under more empirical generalizations.

In the story of Skinner's choice of psychology, there are lacunae of a more factual sort as well. For example, this newcomer to the field of psychology initially knew comparatively little about the discipline, and would have had to rely in part on the contemporary public image of psychology during his career deliberations. We have, however, provided little information on the public images of "psychology" (cf. Skinner, 1976, pp. 291–302), "Russia" (cf. Skinner, 1976, pp. 219, 266), "science," and "behaviorism" in the 1920s. These gaps, interpretational and factual, remain to be filled, before we have a satisfactory explanation of Skinner's shift from literature to psychology. Our purpose in the present article was to survey the terrain and suggest promising paths for future efforts at explanation.

NOTES

1. The motto of the *Haldeman-Julius Monthly.*
2. For example, T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Conrad Aiken, Kenneth Burke, and several others who made enduring reputations.
3. In this period, "little magazines" were published in such unlikely places as Lynn (Massachusetts) and North Manchester (Indiana).
4. Portions of two of these four stories have been excerpted in his *Particulars* (Skinner, 1976, pp. 250–253). I am indebted to Professor Skinner for permitting me to study poems, stories, and other literary products of his years prior to enrolling at Harvard.
5. Arthur Percy Saunders was professor of chemistry at Hamilton College. Skinner tutored his son Blake in mathematics. Skinner spent much time at the Saunders home, and the Saunders

family is mentioned frequently in *Particulars of My Life* (Skinner, 1976, pp. 216–269). Skinner wrote a number of letters to Saunders during the Dark Year, which are now in the possession of Hamilton College. Frank Lorenz, special collections librarian at the College, kindly brought it to my attention, and quotes from the correspondence are made with permission of the College.

6. B. F. Skinner and William A. Skinner, *A Digest of Decisions of the Anthracite Board of Conciliation* was published privately in 1928. The Anthracite Board of Conciliation was an instrument created by the Anthracite Coal Strike Commission that resolved the great coal strike in the anthracite region of Pennsylvania between May and October of 1902. The Commission made wage and other awards to the coal miners in 1903 and established the Board to arbitrate future disputes and to administer the original awards and a sliding scale of wages as local conditions and the index price of coal changed. An account of the strike and its resolution can be found in Cornell (1957/1971).
7. See Skinner (1976, p. 286). Though his father is listed as one of the authors, Professor Skinner informed me that his father "had nothing to do with" the actual writing of the book (personal communication, December 30, 1982), a judgment consistent with his account in *Particulars* (Skinner, 1976, p. 286).
8. See Skinner (1976, p. 299). Berman's book was released in the United States in June of 1927, but it is not likely that Skinner had come upon it. Notice of the book in *The Dial* came in the December, 1927 issue, and it was reviewed by Joseph Jastrow in the January 7, 1928 issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature.* If Skinner had planned to submit a review of the book to the *Saturday Review,* he would have written the review between June, 1927 and January, 1928. It is improbable that he had done so in the summer of 1927, because he had begun work on his *Digest of Decisions* some time in June in Scranton and—plagued by hay fever—spent "more than a month" at Bread Loaf, Vermont, returning on August 8 to Scranton, according to his account in *Particulars* (Skinner, 1976, p. 286).
9. The *Saturday Review of Literature* was owned by several different individuals or corporations before it temporarily discontinued publication in the 1970s. Its files were transferred from one part of the country to another, and portions not in use were discarded during these moves. A lengthy correspondence with its present and immediate past owners has thus far failed to turn up any material on Skinner's review. I thank Norman Cousins for his help.
10. B. F. Skinner's application for graduate study at Harvard University was made available for my perusal by Dr. Margaret Law, Registrar, to whom I express my thanks.
11. Although he does not emphasize this quality, Elms's (1981) interpretation of Skinner's "Dark Year" also implies that his choice of psychology was arbitrary.
12. In conversation during the summer of 1983, Professor Skinner was unable to recall any reason for the half-year gap between his choice of psychology in the fall of 1927 and his application for graduate study in the spring of 1928.
13. The preface is dated February 1, 1928.
14. In a letter to Saunders, December 15, 1926, Skinner credited *Arrowsmith* (Lewis, 1925) with having "saved me from the Compensation Bureau," particularly the contrast in the novel between the idealistic bacteriologist Gottlieb—who reminded Skinner of Hamilton College faculty whom he admired—and the pragmatic Dean of the fictional medical college, who exemplified "the essence of Kiwanis."
15. Louis Berman's (1927) dismissive *The Religion Called Behaviorism* was itself given a very short and unfavorable review in the December, 1927 issue of *The Dial.*
16. See Skinner (1976, p. 280). The fact that Skinner was reading E. A. Burtt and Henri Bergson during his two-year postgraduate period shows how far he had gone beyond strictly literary interests and concerns.
17. An excellent selection of representative poems can be found in Watson (1982). Skinner would have been acquainted with the uncommon diction and rhetorical effects of at least a part of that poetic corpus (namely, lyrical poetry), having purchased a copy of F. T. Palgrave's (1861/1964) *Golden Treasury of the Best Songs and Lyrical Poems in the English Language,* while he was a high school student (Skinner, 1976, p. 162).
18. This conclusion is consistent with Skinner's assessment of his first year at Harvard (Skinner, 1979b, pp. 1–38).

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